



A Sermon on Safeguarding

Preached on the 3rd Sunday before Lent 2020
by the Very Revd Chris Dalliston, Dean of Peterborough

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

A city set on a hill cannot be hidden

Our institutions are under scrutiny as never before.

Last week we celebrated the anniversary of the Queen's Accession. 68 years of extraordinary dedication to duty and service and yet, with the scandal surrounding Prince Andrew and the fragilities of Megan and Harry, the role of the Royal Family, its place in our national life, and even the Crown itself is being openly discussed and examined. And devotees of the Netflix series *The Crown* will have seen dramatized the, at times, agonising demands that have been placed on the Queen to connect her historic role with the demands of a fast changing culture which tends to prize emotion over duty and transparency over reserve.

A city set on a hill

Of course when Jesus used that metaphor he was not referring to the political structures of his day but to the quality of spiritual leadership of his people. In this extract from the Sermon on the Mount we see the beginnings of the challenge that Jesus seems to have made to the “scribes and Pharisees” (a phrase which is a kind of shorthand for Matthew for the religious leaders) to live out more fully, more compassionately, God’s laws which they claimed to uphold but so often seemed either to fall short of – or to use as a method of control rather than liberation.

Hence the image of the salt. Jesus suggests a disconnection between what we might call style and substance – you’re supposed to be like salt but salt is useless if it can’t add flavour to a meal. In fact there was a long tradition of connecting salt to the law – it goes right back to the Book Leviticus and its use in religious sacrifice - so this is all part of Jesus calling into question whether the law is being lived out for the benefit of all or has just become an end in itself.

The challenge the Jesus brought to his own people in his own day needs to be heard again and again in every generation – and our own church has some big questions to face up to in its status as a City set on a hill, as a light to shine before others.

Like the Monarchy and other examples of the so called “establishment” we are also under intense scrutiny. And in no area more than that of safeguarding.

A couple of weeks ago a two part BBC2 documentary charted the shameful activities of Bishop Peter Ball and other priests in the 1980’s and 90’s; their serial abuse of boys and young men and the equally inexcusable pattern of denial and defensiveness within the church from the Archbishop of Canterbury downwards. Not only was it seen as impossible that such supposedly worthy men could possibly be guilty, but their victims were routinely ignored or even vilified as liars or trouble makers.

For some time the Church of England had rather patronisingly assumed that the wave of clerical abuse that brought disgrace upon the Roman Catholic Church, particularly in Ireland and elsewhere, was a problem peculiar to that church and possibly attributable to its traditions of imposed celibacy and all of that. Now we can see all too clearly that the problem is not to be found necessarily in a particular tradition but in the way that institutions under any kind of threat, all too easily revert to closing ranks, denying responsibility and seeking to lay blame elsewhere.

In a very different context we have seen just this week how wretchedly the developers of Grenfell Tower are refusing to be brought to book - even seeking to account for the deaths of many residents on the basis of their pre-existing medical conditions!

But before we begin to relax and imagine that spotting motes in other people’s eyes can excuse us from dealing with the beams in our own, let us be clear that our church, our beloved battered and bruised Church of England has grievously failed in its care for some of the most vulnerable in our society and deeply damaged many innocent young people who will continue to bear the scars of their abuse for the whole of their lives. And let us be clear that this is a deep betrayal of the Gospel, and of the God to whom we are called to bear witness, not least because many now want nothing to do with the God which this institution seeks to proclaim.

In fact we have managed to compound the missional damage caused by this abuse by apparently at the same time being an institution which has gained a reputation for misogyny and homophobia. The at times unedifying struggle over the ordination of women priests and bishops and now the debate around homosexuality has made us a toxic brand for many, especially young people, in our land.

Of course this is not the whole picture. At its best the Church continues to be a place of sanctuary and safety, of care and compassion, of loving service to the community and especially to the poorest and most vulnerable. Christians are among the most active in voluntary activity and community service. And while the senior leadership of the church clearly failed so many in the past there is a sense that we are at least beginning to put our

house in order and devote the appropriate level of resources to ensuring that we can be better and put our lights back on the lampstand where it should be.

I am sure this place is not unblemished – we are all fallen – but we have not thus far uncovered any terrible stories associated with this Cathedral and let me be clear, if we should do so we would leave no stone unturned in seeking to bring the truth to light. Meanwhile we are determined to be better and Canon Sarah and Tim Hitch our Safeguarding Lead are working diligently with others to ensure that our safeguarding processes are robust – not just because we are due to be reviewed later this year – but because it is the right thing to do!! And If you have any concerns please let them know.

Not, of course that it's just down to them. Being a place of safety for children and young people for vulnerable adults and indeed for us all – for we can all at times be vulnerable – requires a deep commitment from each and every one of us – and may I remind all our volunteers that training is not only available but a requirement. It's nothing to fear, indeed it's amazing how enlightening and empowering even the basic training can be and all are welcome to undertake the simple online course.

So the good news is that while we have a lot to repent of and a lot to live up to, we are not imprisoned by the past – new every morning is God's love, forgiveness and healing. We must learn from the past but we must inhabit the future in which Christ's love and grace and strength are the abiding marks of the Church. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. A great Cathedral placed in the heart of a city...cannot be hidden. What we do and how we do it will always, rightly be exposed to scrutiny and Jesus said “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven”.

So let us embrace the challenge to be, with God's help and in the power of the Holy Spirit, the best we can possibly be.

Amen